

THE SETTLEMENT AT GARDEN GROVE, IOWA

Karla Gunzenhauser

A BACKGROUND

As the Saints trudged through the mud from Wayne County, Iowa, in the Spring of 1846, they knew they had to find a place to stop. They needed to leave some of the group at a place where they could raise crops and wait for a later time to travel all the way to the Missouri River. That place became Garden Grove, at the east edge of Decatur County.

Both counties were in the western part of the "New Purchase," land the United States had bought from the Indians. The west part was not to have any Indians in it during this time, and white settlers had not begun to move into the area. As a result, there were no settlers for Mormons to trade with, nor were there any people to put fences across the ridges to impede their travel, or to keep them from establishing a temporary settlement.¹

On April 24, 1846, the location of this needed camp was settled upon. It was on the Weldon Fork of the Grand River, a river the Mormons had known in Missouri prior to 1838. The Weldon Fork is not a large river, but it was a haven for the Saints just the same. The 24th was on a Friday. More of the camp arrived on Saturday, and on Sunday there was a meeting to inform the camp of the work to be done and who would be the leaders of each of the jobs. On Monday, the horn sounded and the work began.

Garden Grove was also within traveling distance of the settlements in Missouri. A contract had been

obtained for the Saints to build the jail in Mercer, Missouri in exchange for food and supplies. As soon as camp was organized, some were again sent to the settlements for food and animal feed as had been done while they were in the Chariton River camp.

Upon reaching Garden Grove, the leaders decided that the next group to travel west would not come by the southern route because it had not presented the best of traveling conditions. In accordance with that decision, messages were sent back to Nauvoo that those who would come in the second group were to have enough food and fodder for themselves and their animals, as they would not be trading with the settlements in Missouri.

Another decision was to start a different settlement further north, so when the second group travelled on the ridge between two river systems, they would not have to dip south to find Garden Grove. They would instead find Mt. Pisgah, the second semi-permanent camp in Iowa. Upon reaching Garden Grove, many Saints wanted to go back to Nauvoo right away to bring their families with them. They were told they could do that, but not until they had dug wells, built temporary log houses and the bridge, and cleared and fenced the land. By May 13th, all the work had been done, so some were allowed to go back to Nauvoo, some stayed at Garden Grove, and some went on their way to the west.²

Now, almost one hundred and fifty years later, the story of Garden Grove is being retold.

KARLA GUNZENHAUSER was born in northern Iowa to a family whose summer vacations centered around Iowa history and events. She attended University of Northern Iowa, where she majored in upper elementary education before teaching Math, Science, Social Studies and Iowa History at Hubbard, Iowa (5th grade) for five years. In 1970 she married Paul Gunzenhauser and became a homemaker. Being close to the historic Mormon Trail was always a strong interest to Karla, but there was no local knowledge about it other than an old wooden sign and ruts in the timber. The creation of the Iowa Mormon Trails Association has provided much life to the old trail in Iowa. Karla is currently on the Board of Directors and is also Historian. She has corresponded with families of John Bennion and Cynthia Terry, who died in Garden Grove, and is interested in hearing from anyone with information to share about family members who lived there.

LOCATING THE TRAIL AT GARDEN GROVE

The Decatur County Conservation Board's Trailside Historical Park had been set aside in 1968 after listening to the locals discuss where the Mormon cemetery had been. The county erected a shelter house and the LDS Church put up a stone and bronze monolith. The park is just west of the present town of Garden Grove, about one-half mile from the county road J-20. Loren Horten, from the Iowa State Historical Society, was interested in locating the Mormon Trail camp sites in 1983. Through a newspaper ad about his project he met Paul and Karla Gunzenhauser, who own the land east of the park.

A few weeks later, Dr. Horton, the Gunzenhausers, and a few others walked in the timber near the park as well as the land to the west owned by the H.B. Gentrys. There was evidence of former trails and roads, but it was difficult to determine which were created by the Mormon Trail and which were the results of other travel to and from the frontier town of Garden Grove.

In the evening, Dr. Horton gave a slide presentation at the community center at Leon, the county seat of Decatur County. After the presentation, the assistant county engineer, Keith Hinds, came in the door with several old books in his arms and asked if these might be of any help in locating the trail. It didn't take long to realize the books contained the 1847 survey notes of the Garden Grove area.

Upon quick review, it was apparent which of the trails we had followed during the day had been part of the Mormon Pioneer Trail and which had developed later. The opportunity to really re-discover the Mormon Trail in southern Iowa had just presented itself to whom-ever might be interested.

THE ARTIFACTS

Knowing the true location of the trail was very exciting to the Gunzenhausers and their children, then ages ten and eleven. East of the park, on their recently plowed land, they began to find small pieces of pottery and china. Collecting was fun, and they returned from each trip to the site with heavily weighted pockets. Eventually the crops came up and the fun had to stop. These pieces of the past, were put into oatmeal boxes and saved.

IOWA: EYE TO I

In June 1989, Dr. Horton brought a bus load of teachers from Iowa to the Trailside Historical Park as part of a traveling Iowa History Class. Paul Gunzenhauser was asked to give a short talk on the area and its Mormon history. D. E. Pidcock of Corydon was asked to talk about its archeology. Dr. Horton's co-teacher was Michael Zahs, a Social Studies teacher from Washington High School. He had a big surprise in store for the students, the Gunzenhausers, and the Pidcocks.

Taking in his hands two fairly large "L" shaped wires that had once been coat hangers, he proceeded to remind the group that white Americans were buried here east and west in rows that go north and south. He then began to walk south with the wires in front of him, holding them loosely so they could swing from side to side. After a few steps, the wires swung across each other and finally crossed. Zahs announced he had found a Mormon grave.

The students were allowed to try the same thing, and it worked for most of them as well. Zahs explained that although this is an unscientific method of finding ground that has been disturbed, it is very useful for those who have to find buried cables at work, and it does work for most people who try it.

Before leaving with the bus, Mr. Zahs hopped over the fence into the Gunzenhauser land (with permission), walked a short distance with his wires, and declared he had found the outline of a cabin. That, of course, opened up a whole new world of possibilities.

THE CABIN SITE

Later in the summer of 1989, the Boy Scouts from the LDS Church in Osceola, Iowa, were camping in the city park at Garden Grove. They asked Mr. Gunzenhauser to come out to the site and cemetery and talk to them. It was a wet and cool morning, but no one seemed to mind. After giving the boys a short talk and showing them how the coat hangers worked, he led them down the Mormon Trail section on the Gunzenhauser land toward the timber. As they started back, it was a sight to behold, a bevy of boys spread out on a gentle ridge holding wires in front of them.

Soon there were shouts of, "What is this, Mr. Gunzenhauser?" and, "Is this anything important, Mr. Gunzenhauser?" The boys found their wires swinging as indicative of disturbed ground. They joined together and methodically began to understand one area at a time. Upon working the wires and placing some flags in the ground, they began to see they had outlined a rectangle. They had found a cabin near the Mormon Trail. They also found a sunken area near the cabin. It might have been a well for holding water.

MORE DISCOVERIES

Later in the summer, Paul Gunzenhauser showed the cabin site to his seventeen-year-old son, Robert. The next year, when Paul was putting up hay on the ridge, Robert wandered with his wires through the oats that had been planted for the U.S. Government set-aside program. Soon Paul heard him shout, "Dad, Dad, I think I found a really long building here." The location of the "really long building" was in the same area where the artifacts had been picked up by the Gunzenhausers seven years earlier.

Over the next three years, that "really long building" began to emerge as the location of the temporary log housing that had been built in May 1846, before the first group of Mormons started on toward Mt. Pisgah. It emerged as an orderly collection of rows of cabins with chimneys on the east and west ends. Each cabin was divided into two parts with an inside partition that had a door in it. The outside doors were either on the north or south side of the cabins, but most cabins had doors on both walls.

The cabin site area was large, and sorting out all those walls was not easy. Before the 1992 "Iowa: Eye to I" tour, six or seven cabins had been located and marked by the Gunzenhausers. During that tour, Michael Zahs began to find another row of cabins north of the marked cabins, and Robert Gunzenhauser found another row to the south. Thus, in one afternoon, the number of known cabins tripled.

To date there are an estimated five rows of cabins, lined up going east for six hundred feet over fairly flat land. The buildings are on the highest ground,

but the land gently drops off on all four sides. The Mormon Trail runs north of the cabin site.

THE DIARIES TALK

Locating cabin sites was exciting, but adding parts of diaries from the 1846 trek enhanced the scene at Garden Grove.

The little white stakes at the housing site came to life through diary entries. Hosea Stout, for example, wrote that there was a long string of "log houses now being put up on the east and west farm for the accommodation of those who were going to stay, which gave the appearance of a civilized country again."³

Charles C. Rich notes, "Log houses were built along hastily laid out streets in orderly fashion."⁴

And William Cahoon entered,

We built houses and laid out farms. I remained at this place until the 13th of May. I left my family at this place, took my team and my brother Daniel's family and traveled first in Brother Spencer's company until the 19th and then went back for my family. They were well.⁵

"An Interesting Early History of the County" by Harriet Kellogg, one of the first of a group of eighteen to settle at Garden Grove in 1848, is even more descriptive:

The Mormon cabins, though with one or two exceptions entirely destitute of windows, were healthful, comfortable dwellings, in consequence of their one grand feature, open fireplaces. These were made without a farthing of expense except the time necessary for their construction. A kind of clay, such as bricks are made of, was hauled to the building and some clapboards or long shingles set up edgewise and firmly staked in the shape of a fireplace--this frame being hollow to admit the clay, which is pounded in dry until it is almost as smooth as putty. The frame is then removed, a stick chimney built on, a hearth pounded in and it is ready for the fire. The amount of comfort dispensed

